DAWN

PTI, 'N' continue to spar over *Economist* article controversy

PTI spox asks rulers to refrain from 'agenda-driven' campaign; Punjab information minister terms report 'accurate'

By Ikram Junaidi

ISLAMABAD: A day after an article published in a British magazine shed light on the alleged role of former first lady Bushra Bibi in statecraft during the PTI government, the ruling PML-N and the PTI continued to engage in a war of words over the contents of the report.

While Punjab Information Minister Azma Bokhari believed the report to be "completely accurate and fully aligned with the facts", PTI spokesperson Sheikh Waqqas Akram asked the PPP and the PML-N to refrain from the "agenda-driven" campaign against ex-PM Imran Khan and his spouse.

He said the campaign through "concocted stories" was nothing but an effort to divert public attention from disastrous policies that had devastated the country "politically, morally, socially and economically".

According to the PTI leader, the government had exhausted every tactic and committed every act over the past three years to remove the PTI founding chairman from the political arena, but all these measures proved counterproductive, and his popularity continued to flourish with each passing day. He predicted that the days of incumbent governments were numbered, and they were now frantically searching for escape routes.

Meanwhile, the Punjab information minister quipped that after the revelations about PTI founder Imran Khan, Bushra Bibi's actions were now making headlines in the international media.

In a statement here on Sunday, she said that the report had exposed the "deception of the fake spiritual setup and the so-called mysticism that concealed darker intentions".

"The man who used to threaten his opponents, saying he won't spare them, himself believed that the manipulated information fed to his wife was some form of spirituality," she stated.

Commenting on the publication's report, Ms Bokhari said that for four years, the 'coach' and 'spiritual guide' misled the PTI founder. Despite claiming to champion change and end corruption, Bushra Bibi was facilitating a new form of "legitimised corruption".

"A country and its economy cannot run on sorcery, spells, or fraudulent spiritual practices. The so-called spirituality of those who wanted to bury their opponents metaphorically has already been dead for three years," she added.

Last week, *The Economist* published an article covering Mr Khan's marriage to Bushra Bibi and her alleged role and extent of influence in his decision-making during his tenure as prime minister.

'The mystic, the cricketer and the spy: Pakistan's game of thrones', written by Owen Bennett Jones and Bushra Taskeen, claimed Bushra Bibi wielded an "absolute" influence and "upset crucial friends and allies". The article also quotes a former driver of Mr Khan, alleging that Bushra Bibi used to practice 'black magic'.

"Accepting his wife's claim that she could read faces, he would ask for photographs of potential candidates, which would be sent to Bushra Bibi for a decision. She also got involved in pettier matters," the article went on to say.

The article also shed light on her alleged ties with the intelligence community.

"According to the rumours, the officer would, for example, give one of Bushra Bibi's pirs advance notice about which politician was about to be arrested. Bushra Bibi would then tell Khan that she had received a revelation about the future. When the event she predicted came to pass, Khan would be amazed at his wife's perspicacity and conclude she did indeed have a direct line to God," it claimed.

Amjad Mahmood in Lahore also contributed to this report

FLANKED by PM Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, Jordan's King Abdullah II is briefed on military hardware during a visit to the Tilla Firing Ranges.—White Star

Islamabad flaunts military prowess

Continued from Page 1

professionalism and operational preparedness demonstrated by the participating troops and aircrews," it added.

PM Shehbaz expressed Pakistan's "deep respect and affection" for the Jordanian king and the people of Jordan, saying the visit reflected "enduring friendship, mutual trust and a shared desire for peace and development".

Earlier, King Abdullah conferred the Order of the Military Merit of First Degree upon the COAS "in recognition of his outstanding service and significant contributions" to strengthening military cooperation between Jordan and Pakistan, ISPR said.

The statement described the visit as "a significant milestone in reinforcing the historic bonds of fraternity and brotherhood" between the two nations.

Highest civilian award

Separately, Pakistan conferred the Nishan-i-Pakistan, the country's highest civilian award, on King Abdullah II during a special investiture ceremony at the Presidency.

President Asif Ali Zardari presented the honour, after which King Abdullah awarded President Zardari the Order of the Bejewelled Grand Cordon of Al-Nahda, one of Jordan's highest distinctions.

The citation for the award described King Abdullah as "a visionary leader and a statesman of exceptional calibre" whose commitment to moderation, justice and dialogue had earned global respect.

It praised Jordan's emergence under his leadership as "a beacon of stability, tolerance and prosperity", and noted his "unwavering advocacy" for a just settlement of the Palestinian question and efforts towards the Gaza peace agreement.

Stressing that the Jordanian king has been a "steadfast friend" of Pakistan, it said that by virtue of his personal engagement, relations between the two countries have been "significantly strengthened across diverse fields encompassing political and economic cooperation, defence collaboration, educational partnerships, cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts".

It added, "These developments serve to reinforce the enduring foundation of the historic friendship and brotherhood between the two nations, while concurrently fostering new avenues of cooperation.

"The people and government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan deeply value His Majesty King Abdullah II's … commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and consistent solidarity with Pakistan."

Hamid Asghar in Jhelum also contributed to this report

Pakistan 'welcomes' Tehran's offer to mediate with Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD: The Foreign Office (FO) spokesperson said on Sunday that Pakistan welcomed Iran's offer of mediation between Islamabad and Kabul and would "not shy away from" it.

"Iran is a brotherly, friendly country. Pakistan is always in favour of finding peaceful resolutions of issues through dialogue and diplomacy, and we appreciate the offer of mediation of our brotherly country, Iran," FO spokesperson Tahir Hussain Andrabi told *Dawn* upon a query about reports that Tehran was working to convene a regional meeting for mediation between Islamabad and the Afghan Taliban.

"We believe that Iran can play an important role. We would not shy away from any mediatory role by Iran. Mediations are always welcome," Andrabi said, adding that Pakistan had a "very strong case".

He further stated: "Generally, mediations are resented by a country or a side which is on a weak legal or a political case. Pakistan's case on this issue, on terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, is very strong. So, obviously we will not shy away from mediation."— Dawn Report

Fafen urges parliament to reform LG system

ISLAMABAD: The Free and Fair Election Network (Fafen) has urged parliament to strengthen the country's long-neglected system of local governments in a future constitutional amendment that truly reflects the spirit of Articles 7, 32, and 140-A of the Constitution.

Highlighting persistent gaps in the implementation of constitutional provisions related to devolution, Fafen's latest policy brief, 'Devolution in Practice: Ensuring Effective and Accountable Local Governments in Pakistan', calls for comprehensive reforms to ensure continuity and autonomy of local governments across all federating units. The 18th Amendment liberally devolved powers to the provinces but the same spirit has not been shown by the provinces in devolving political, administrative, and financial responsibility and authority to the local governments.

In a statement, Fafen proposed a set of actionable reforms to address chronic challenges in local governance.—Ikram Junaidi

Gwadar bans vehicles carrying Iranian oil

Move aims to curb fuel smuggling from across the border

By Behram Baloch

GWADAR: Authorities in the Gwadar district have imposed an immediate ban on oil-carrying vehicles, particularly targeting Zamyad trucks and similar transporters, from moving fuel between Jiwani, Paanwaan, and Gwadar city.

The district administration issued a notification advising all drivers and relevant parties to steer clear of travelling towards Jiwani.

Officials warned that any vehicle in violation of the ban would be subject to strict legal consequences, including on-the-spot confiscation by law enforcement agencies.

Law enforcement bodies, including the police, Pakistan Coast Guard, and Frontier Corps, have been instructed to rigorously enforce the ban, as per the district administration's directive.

The measure aims to curb an illicit trade that costs the national treasury billions. An inquiry in 2020 revealed oil smuggling from Iran was worth over Rs250 billion annually.

A more recent intelligence report from April 2024 noted that approximately 10 million litres of Iranian petrol and diesel were smuggled into Pakistan daily, causing a revenue loss of over Rs227 billion.

The significant difference in fuel prices between Pakistan and Iran has turned smuggling into a thriving business.

According to officials, a main smuggling artery is the sea route from Sistan, Iran, where speed boats transport fuel in cans along the Dasht river to Jiwani. Thousands of boats are allegedly involved in the illegal operations, supported by storage facilities and hotels along the coast.

From the coast, the cargo is moved in modified trucks to areas near Gwadar. It is then transported in non-Custom-paid pickups to the rest of Balochistan and bordering areas of Punjab and Sindh.

While the trade serves as the only means of livelihood for many people, it remains a lucrative opportunity for others. Smuggling continues to undermine legitimate business, facilitates tax evasion and fuels organised crime in the province.

The region's reliance on smuggled fuel has previously led to widespread disruption. During a recent conflict between Israel and Iran, the supply of Iranian oil was severely affected, forcing a large number of petrol pumps to close.

The border districts of Turbat, Gwadar, Panjgur, Chagai, Washuk and Mashkail were the worst-affected, facing not only fuel shortages but also food scarcity, as many edibles are also imported from Iran. At the time, 60 to 70 per cent of petrol pumps reportedly closed due to the supply suspension.

Successive governments have launched initiatives to stop the smuggling, but the problem persists. Last year, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif directed the Balochistan government to take measures to discourage the transport of smuggled fuel out of the province.

Additionally, in August this year, the government passed a bill in the National Assembly to digitally track petroleum products from their origin to sales, aiming to curb smuggling and adulteration.

Ex-military officers hail 27th Amendment

ISLAMABAD: The Pakistan Ex-Servicemen Society (PESS) on Sunday welcomed the recent structural reforms introduced in the army through the 27th Constitutional Amendment, describing them as essential for adapting Pakistan's defence framework to the demands of modern and digitalised warfare.

In its meeting, the society endorsed the creation of a separate Federal Constitutional Court (FCC), noting that the reform would streamline the justice system by allowing the Supreme Court to focus more effectively on constitutional matters.

The meeting concluded that, to provide central strategic direction for the country's defence — ensuring jointness, enhanced coordination, and synergy across all facets of modern, digitalised warfare — Pakistan's higher defence organisation required restructuring. This has been appropriately addressed through the 27th Constitutional Amendment with the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Forces (CDF).

The establishment of a separate FCC was also termed a welcome step. It will allow the Supreme Court to dedicate sufficient time to its constitutional mandate while ensuring timely justice for citizens.

It added that the constitutional amendments were the prerogative of Parliament and may be undertaken as needed, provided the spirit of the Constitution, particularly the trichotomy of power, is fully upheld.

It was in Pakistan's supreme national interest to resolve issues with Afghanistan through engagement and effective diplomacy involving regional friendly countries, the meeting said.

Indian involvement in fomenting terrorism in Pakistan through Afghan soil must be highlighted at the international level with concrete evidence, along with recommendations for FATF and UN sanctions against India for violations of global norms and international Law.

The meeting noted that since armed forces personnel retire at a comparatively young age, a specific quota for their induction into various government departments on merit should be institutionalised and effectively enforced.

The minimum pension for soldiers, sailors, airmen, and widows of martyrs should not be lower than the minimum officially prescribed wage in the country.

The meeting appreciated the government's initiative to create a separate pension fund, partly contributed by the government and partly by the employee, for future investment and long-term self-sustainability. It said that several ex-servicemen affected by recent floods were still awaiting compensation from the respective provincial governments. The PESS urged that this process be expedited without further delay.—Syed Irfan Raza

Five TTP terrorists killed in Tirah

By Ibrahim Shinwari

KHYBER: At least five terrorists affiliated with the proscribed Tekreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were killed in an intelligence-based operation in Tirah valley of Khyber district, local sources said.

Acting under the command of local TTP commander Abuzar, two important Afghan terrorists were among those who were killed in Merikhel area. Local sources said that the operation took place on Saturday-Sunday night. Three of the slain insurgents were identified as Ehsan Badri and Subaib Lezari, both Afghans, and Omar Sangari from Khyber district.

It was learnt that funeral of the two Afghan terrorists was later held in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan.

There was, however, no official confirmation of the killing of these insurgents by security officials in the region.

The sources in Bara said that the five TTP men were involved in an attack on a security check point in Bar Qambarkhel area of Bara a few days back. Security forces had successfully repulsed that attack. The bodies of five terrorists were later found in a cave where they were believed to have been hiding. It was also learnt through the sources that these terrorists had also earned notoriety by filming beheading of some people and later posting their gory images on social media.

Sugarcane footprint on the rise in cotton belt

- Nearly 40pc of Pakistan's sugar-milling capacity now concentrated in former top cotton district Rahim Yar Khan and its border belt
- Shift from cotton to sugarcane blamed for water depletion, soil degradation, and rising water table

By Amjad Mahmood

LAHORE: Persistent violations of crop-zoning rules for sugarcane and the unchecked establishment of new sugar mills have drastically reshaped Rahim Yar Khan — once Pakistan's largest cotton-producing district — where sugar-milling capacity is rapidly expanding both within the district and along the Punjab — Sindh border.

Sources say almost 40 per cent of the country's total sugar-milling capacity is now concentrated in Rahim Yar Khan and its border belt alone — a shift that experts fear is accelerating the decline of cotton, straining water resources, and degrading soil.

Six sugar mills currently operate in Rahim Yar Khan with a combined crushing capacity of 135,000 tonnes per day, the highest for any single district in the country. One of these mills is reportedly adding another 10,000 tonnes per day to its capacity this season.

The sources added that two powerful industrial groups, after being denied permission for additional mills within the district, have set up new units just across the Punjab–Sindh border — one with a capacity of 16,000 tonnes per day and the other 19,000 tonnes.

A Sindh-based political family already operates a 16,000-tonne unit there, while another influential group is said to be relocating a major mill from interior Sindh to the same border belt. This relocated mill, sources claim, will become operational during the current crushing season, potentially triggering a further shift from cotton to sugarcane.

Pakistan, which until a few years ago ranked as the world's fourth-largest cotton producer, has seen its output collapse from around 15 million bales in 2014-15 to barely 5.5m bales in 2024-25, largely due to the unchecked spread of sugarcane in designated cotton zones.

The extraordinary expansion in sugarcane cultivation is not only responsible for a massive drawdown of irrigation resources — with millions of acre-feet of water wasted — but is also raising the water table to levels that threaten to render vast tracts barren.

Concurrently, pollution from sugarcane processing is harming fibre quality, pushing textile mills to import high-grade cotton to meet export commitments, Cotton Ginners Forum Chairman Ihsanul Haq tells *Dawn*.

Recalling the "crop transformation", he says that until a few years ago, Rahim Yar Khan was Pakistan's single largest cotton-producing district, cultivating the crop on 800,000 acres and yielding 1.3–1.4m bales annually. Across Bahawalpur division's three districts, cotton output exceeded 4m bales.

During the 2024-25 cotton year, however, the same region produced just 1.5m bales, with expectations of an even lower harvest this season.

Sindh outperforms Punjab

He notes that for the first time in the country's history, Sindh outperformed Punjab in cotton output during 2024-25 — 2.8m bales in Sindh versus 2.7m in Punjab. This marks a stark reversal from 2014-15, when national output peaked at 15m bales, with Punjab contributing 11m bales compared Sindh's 4m.

"The ratio has steadily eroded," he says, adding that preliminary assessments suggest Sindh will again surpass Punjab this year, despite Punjab having planted cotton on 1.4m hectares, more than double Sindh's 630,000 hectares.